

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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Blood may not be thicker than duty, but perhaps the head is.

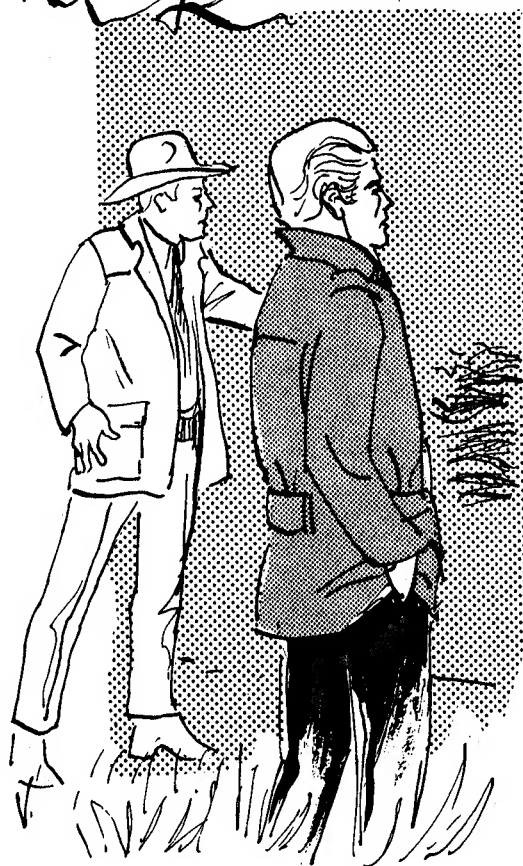
END of the Line

My cousin Clarence is a county deputy sheriff and he was going to show me the scene of the crime. He eased the patrol car around the curve. "Who in the world would want to murder the custodian of a town dump?"

I shrugged. "Maybe Elmo's job had absolutely nothing to do with his death. I didn't even know until now that the dump had a custodian."

"We have this new law that says every dump has to have somebody around to supervise dumping. Also, everything has to be bulldozed under at the end of the day. It's the ecology kick, I guess," Clarence explained.

I had been away from Sharp's River for some twenty years—excluding returns for the holidays and such—but two weeks ago I finally returned to stay. "How can the township afford a custodian?"



"The board decided to open the dump only on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons from now on. One to five."

All things change. In the old days the town dump had been open twenty-four hours a day,

free to all, with no supervision. Our only concession to health and neatness was to have Pete Higgins, after he milked his cows on Saturdays, drive the town bulldozer to the dump site and smooth things over a bit to keep down the rats.

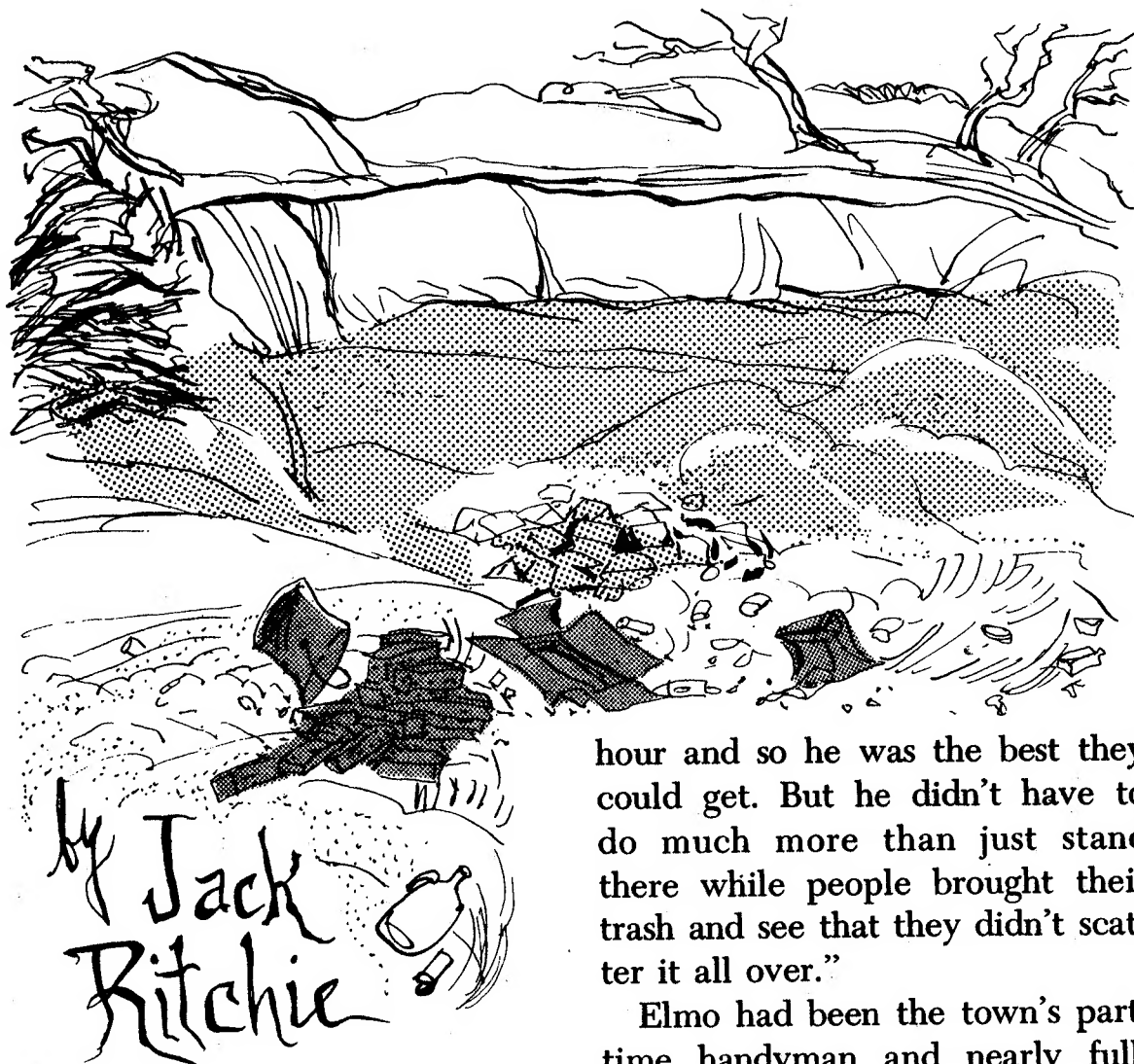
We generally referred to the dump as the Town Exchange and hardly a man or boy, while unloading his own collection of trash, did not spy a perfectly good

pair of coaster wheels or some only slightly used two-by-fours which he could claim and take back home.

As a matter of fact, my grandfather built a quite presentable outdoor fireplace and grill with bricks and grates he had salvaged from the dump.

"Why did the board hire Elmo?" I asked. "I would hardly call him the dependable type."

"The job pays only \$1.60 an



hour and so he was the best they could get. But he didn't have to do much more than just stand there while people brought their trash and see that they didn't scatter it all over."

Elmo had been the town's part-time handyman and nearly full-

time drunk. I doubted very much that his wife Margie would miss him at all.

Clarence turned onto the gravel road and stopped at the chain stretched across the road. He unlocked the padlock and pulled the chain off the road into the tall grass.

We drove another two hundred yards through the winding wooded road.

The dump was actually a ravine, now half-filled and covered over. In another fifty years, at the present rate, it would be filled completely and probably turned into a park.

We left the car and Clarence pointed to a spot on the ground. "A shotgun was used. We haven't found it yet. I suppose the murderer took it along with him when he left. Elmo was shot between two-thirty and three last Saturday afternoon."

"How can you be so certain about the time?"

"Dave Perkins finally got around to cutting down those dead apple trees in his orchard. He and his three boys brought the wood and trimmings here at two-thirty or thereabouts. When they left, Elmo was still alive and drinking beer."

I glanced at the pile of applewood at the edge of the ravine. It

had not yet been leveled by the bulldozer and covered. Evidently the work had been postponed so as not to disturb the scene of the crime.

Clarence walked around the spot where Elmo had fallen. "The Wicker twins came here at three-thirty with a load of rocks from their fields. I guess they got tired of building stone fences. Anyway, they found Elmo lying here dead and bloody."

I looked at the rocks near the bottom of the ravine. Obviously the Wicker twins had decided that as long as they were here, they might as well unload before calling the police. "Have you considered robbery?"

"Elmo had \$2.27 on him and that was about his average." Clarence sighed. "The most logical suspect, of course, is his wife."

Ah, yes. Margie Duggan, née Burke. Some eighteen or nineteen years ago she had married Elmo.

Actually the match had not seemed totally unacceptable at the time. Elmo's father had owned the furniture store and funeral parlor. However, he made poor local investments and died in debt. Elmo, faced with earning a living in a nonpaternal world, gradually and steadily deteriorated.

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can't see Margie killing him."

Clarence seemed to want to agree. "Elmo had only enough insurance to bury him decent. Margie claims she was in her basement doing the wash at the time Elmo was killed. Unfortunately there's nobody who can back her up on that."

Looking down the ravine again, I saw a perfectly sound, though slightly soiled, lamp shade; also two returnable soft-drink bottles. As a boy I'd spent many afternoons here scrounging about for just such treasures.

"On the other hand," Clarence said, "maybe the syndicate killed him."

I blinked. "What syndicate?"

He shrugged. "Any syndicate. There must be dozens, I suppose."

"Now, Clarence, why would the syndicate—*any* syndicate—want to kill Elmo?"

He thought that over. "You can never tell about people. Maybe Elmo had a French Connection or something. He might have safe-deposit boxes full of money."

"Clarence, if Elmo had money, he wouldn't have been drinking beer."

We got back into the car and Clarence drove back toward Sharp's River, some three miles down the main road. It is a singularly quiet and beautiful village,

the total population of which has not varied by ten percent over the last two hundred years. Most of our high-school graduates are forced to leave for greener economic pastures, returning for holidays and funerals, and wishing sincerely that it were possible to remain here.

After high school, I too left Sharp's River for college and law school, and New York, but I determined that as soon as possible—preferably before dotage—I would return for permanent residence.

Clarence parked in front of Margie's home, a Cape Cod over one hundred years old, set on an acre of spontaneous garden and comfortably shaggy lawn.

Henry Tupper's mail cart was pulled up beside the white picket fence, but Henry was nowhere in sight.

"I'm going to have to ask Margie a few more questions," Clarence said.

I nodded. "I'll wait right here."

As Clarence got out of the car, the front door of Margie's house opened and Henry Tupper emerged. He came down the walk and nodded to us. "Nice crisp day."

Clarence regarded him coolly. "Since when are you delivering the mail personally? Don't people have their mailboxes outside of

their houses in this town, Henry?"

Henry smiled. "I was just having a cup of coffee. Margie has one ready for me now and then on cold days. She's a very thoughtful woman."

"Is she the only one on your route who gives you coffee?"

"Now that you mention it," Henry said, "she isn't."

Margie stood at the open door. She raised her voice. "Hello, Clarence. Is that Wilbur Peabody out there in your car? Bring him in. There's no point in letting him stay out there in the cold."

Margie let us into the house.

She was still a singularly attractive woman. How old was she now? Not yet forty. She looked ten years younger, and she did not seem unduly overcome with grief at Elmo's death. She led us into the kitchen.

"Let me express my condolences," I said.

Margie's green eyes regarded me rather speculatively. "Thank you, Wilbur. You've come back to Sharp's River to stay?"

I nodded. "I'm retired, so to speak. Been back about two weeks."

Clarence accepted a cup and saucer. "Margie, could you tell me again, in your own words, where you were between two-thirty and three on Saturday afternoon?"

"In the basement doing the washing, Clarence. I have to do it on Saturdays because of my job at the co-op."

"You were alone?"

"Yes, Clarence. Absolutely alone. If I'd known I would be a murder suspect, I would have arranged for a witness or two. Usually my cousin Thelma comes over on Saturday afternoons, but she phoned in the morning and said she had the flu and couldn't make it."

She poured Clarence's coffee. "How long were you gone, Wilbur?"

"Nearly twenty years."

"Counting college and law school? And only twenty years? You must have been a brilliant lawyer or saved your money. Or both."

I smiled. "I saved my money."

Clarence had been looking out of the kitchen window. "Are those clothes poles outside?"

"Of course, Clarence," Margie said.

Clarence nodded. "When a person does the laundry, she's got to hang up the wet clothes, doesn't she? Maybe somebody walking by between two-thirty and three on Saturday saw you doing it?"

"I hang out the wash only on warm, sunny days, Clarence. Saturday was cloudy and gloomy and

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cold, so I used the dryer instead. It's in the basement. Would you like to see it? I think my fingerprints are still all over it."

Clarence stirred his coffee. "I guess not."

Margie handed me a cup of coffee. "Now, if Elmo had only gotten killed at ten-thirty, I would have had a very secure kind of alibi. The mail comes at that time and I talked a few minutes with Henry Tupper. He tells the most delightful stories."

When Clarence and I left Margie's house some twenty minutes later, Dr. Sparrow's car drew up at the curb.

Dr. Sparrow is a tall thin man who wears tinted glasses. He and his wife came to us from Augusta two years ago. Unfortunately she passed away of pneumonia last July.

He nodded to us. "Just dropping in to see how Margie is doing. She has a sore throat and congestion."

Clarence regarded him without enthusiasm. "I didn't know that doctors made house calls anymore."

"Not usually," Dr. Sparrow admitted, "but this is an exception. You can't really expect a grief-stricken widow to drag herself to my office."

He moved past us for the door

of the house in an apparent hurry.

"Didn't you forget your bag?" Clarence asked.

Dr. Sparrow stopped. "I won't need the bag."

"You've got the tongue depressors in your pocket?"

Dr. Sparrow glared for a moment and then went back to his car for his bag.

Clarence and I got into the patrol car and he pulled away from the curb.

"I don't think Margie is capable of murder," I said.

Clarence seemed grim. "Anybody is capable of murder if he or she sets his mind to it."

"Let us use logic," I said. "How many automobiles do, or did, the Duggans own?"

"Just one. A ten-year-old Ford."

"And Elmo used it to drive to the dump?"

"Right. It was parked in among the trees."

"If Margie shot Elmo, how did she get to the dump?"

"She could have walked."

"Through town, across three miles of road—or at least open fields—carrying a shotgun? I certainly think someone would have noticed her."

Clarence pulled the car to the curb and took out his notebook. He began writing.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Making a list of all the bachelors and widowers in town. I'm interested only in those of the right age and a good income or some other means. I don't think Margie would get involved in killing Elmo just to marry another poor man. She's had enough of that already."

"Are you telling me that you think she had an accomplice?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "One way of solving this murder might be just to wait and see who she marries after the period of grieving."

"Now, Clarence, if she's been carrying on with anybody, the whole town would know about it."

"Not necessarily. They might have saved their canoodling for after the ten-thirty news. That's when everybody turns off his TV set and goes to bed. The two of them could have worked at the crime together. She stayed home with an alibi while he did the murdering."

"If she stayed home with an alibi, why didn't she have one?"

"Something just went wrong there. She expected her cousin Thelma to come over as usual, but she didn't because she got the flu."

"Yes, but Thelma called Margie in the *morning* and told her she

couldn't come over. Surely if Margie needed an alibi in the afternoon, she could easily have arranged to be with somebody during the crucial time."

Clarence sighed. "Maybe she still was able to manage the murder by herself somehow, with the idea of getting married again to someone better. Maybe whoever she's got picked out doesn't even know about it yet."

"That's a pretty chancy way of doing things." I looked over Clarence's shoulder at the list. It contained three names: Dr. Sparrow's, Henry Tupper's, and my own.

"Now see here, Clarence, what is *my* name doing on that list?"

"I'm sorry, Wilbur, but blood isn't thicker than duty. Where were you on Saturday between two-thirty and three?"

"I was at home trying to finish *Adam Bede*. I started reading it nine years ago and I am now on page 178."

"Any witnesses?"

"Just a raven who came knocking at my door." I looked at the list again. "Dr. Sparrow?"

"I'm thinking about an autopsy on his late wife's body. This whole sordid triangle could have started longer ago than we dare think."

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and three Saturday afternoon?"

"He says he was at the medical convention in Portland. But he didn't see anybody there he knew or who knew him."

"What about Henry Tupper? I've never heard of anybody murdering her husband to marry a mailman."

"Why not? The job is steady as long as there's mail to be delivered, and I know for a fact that the starting pay is \$3.43 an hour. Henry's been on the job for twenty years and there's no telling how much he's pulling down now. And I know that he gets through with his route at two o'clock."

I smiled. "I have one more name to add to your list."

"Who?"

"You."

Clarence's mouth dropped. "Me?"

"Why not? As you said, anybody can commit murder. I fail to see why you should be excluded just because you are a deputy sheriff. Where were *you* between two-thirty and three on Saturday?"

"I was riding some of the back roads on general patrol."

"Is there anyone who can verify that?"

"I talked to the radio dispatcher a couple of times."

"From where? As far as he

would know, it might have been from the dump."

Clarence slowly added his name to the list. "Maybe it was a syndicate killing at that. Did you ever meet up with a syndicate in New York?"

Actually, I had. Three years previously the court had appointed me to defend an indigent named Danny Moore on the charge of breaking and entering. Somewhat to my surprise I obtained a verdict of not guilty. Breaking and entering was not really his stock-in-trade. He had simply fallen into financial straits between assignments by the syndicate.

"Frankly, Clarence," I said, "I can't think of a single reason why any syndicate would want to murder Elmo."

He pondered that for a while. "Suppose it was an accident? The syndicate got the wrong man?" Clarence put away his notebook. "Are you doing anything this afternoon?"

"Not particularly. Why?"

"It's Wednesday and the town dump has to open again for regular business and we don't have any caretaker. Since you're retired and all, and not really doing anything anyway—"

"Me? The custodian of a dump?"

"It would be only for this afternoon. The town board's meeting tomorrow and will probably come up with someone permanent."

"Now, look here—"

"If you find anything out there you can use, you're welcome to take it home. Like Dave Perkins' applewood. You can't beat it for a fireplace."

I rubbed my jaw. Applewood *was* rather scarce.

"And I heard that Elwood Beaver just tore down one of his old kitchen chimneys. He'll probably cart over the bricks today. Must be a lot of them still perfectly good."

I wavered. Come to think of it, I intended to lay a rustic brick walk in my garden. Good aged bricks would be ideal for the job.

Clarence handed me the key to the padlock on the dump chain. "And you might even get some excitement out of it. Suppose the murderer decides to revisit the scene of the crime?"

At five minutes to one that afternoon, I pulled the chain off the road and drove onto the dump site.

Ten minutes later I heard the sound of tires on the gravel road and Jake Nelson came into view with his pickup truck loaded with large plastic bags full of leaves.

I have never been able to un-

derstand why people insist upon burning or dumping leaves. They make excellent mulch for the garden—a bit acid perhaps, but that can be easily remedied with a touch of nitrogen.

I directed Jake to put the bags to one side where I could pick them up later at my convenience. Perhaps tomorrow. After all, I was the custodian of the dump for the time being and I had the key.

During the course of the afternoon I was often tempted, but I restrained myself to salvaging only a pair of Scottie bookends and a Teflon frying pan which still retained ninety percent of its Teflon.

I was alone, near closing time, when I again heard the sound of wheels on the gravel road and Clarence's patrol car pulled up.

He got out of the car. "How's business?"

"A little slack. I'm thinking of advertising."

Clarence stared down at the darkening ravine. "I asked Margie to marry me."

I blinked. "You what?"

He nodded. "I wanted to settle a point once and for all. If Margie had an accomplice she was going to marry later, she would obviously turn me down cold."

"But she didn't?"

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posals," Clarence said wonderingly.

"And then you withdrew it?"

"No. I decided that I might just as well let the proposal stand. I mean I've always admired Margie from afar. Of course we're going to wait a decent six months before we get married."

I smiled. "I seem to remember you saying that this murder would be solved eventually by just waiting to see who Margie would marry."

He turned. "Do you think I had anything to do with Elmo's death?"

"Of course not," I said quickly. "Logic tells me that. If you and Margie had planned this whole thing, I don't think you could have done it without some prior canoodling. To establish compatibility, so to speak. And if you *had* canoodled, I'm certain the whole town would have known about it."

"Don't use that word," Clarence said.

"What word?"

"Canoodling."

"You know," I said, "the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that it must be a syndicate killing. Just something that happened, and never will be solved."

He studied me for a few seconds and then went back to the patrol car.

END OF THE LINE

I watched Clarence drive away.

Ah, yes. The syndicate. I had also learned from Danny Moore that a man named Leland Morrison made the killing assignments and that the going rate for a murder was something in the neighborhood of ten thousand dollars.

The economics of the situation impressed me considerably. I had not exactly been a roaring financial success as a lawyer, so when Danny, upon leaving me, got into his automobile and promptly and fatally ran into a telephone pole, I recognized the knock of opportunity.

Circuitously and well-disguised—I thought—I contacted Mr. Morrison, presented him with fictional credentials and offered my services as a replacement for the late Danny Moore.

After a probationary period—the liquidation of several minor individuals—I was put on the regular payroll. My new work required that I travel; however, the pay was excellent and I doubt very much whether anyone I eliminated did not merit death, for one reason or another.

In less than three years, I accumulated enough money for retirement—I am not greedy and I did not have to pay income taxes—so I simply disappeared from the scene and returned to Sharp's

River to spend the rest of my days.

I thought my true identity and location safe, but I was wrong.

Leland Morrison had appeared, smiling; his object, of course, being blackmail. He had promised to keep my little secret from the world and from the syndicate for a price.

However, I do not deal with blackmailers, so I shot him.

After Morrison's death, it struck me that the best and most appropriate disposal of the body would be in the town dump. I would conceal it under some of the debris, and since it was a Saturday, Pete Higgins would be along with the bulldozer to cover it permanently.

When I arrived at the dump, it was deserted, or so I thought. I had not known that it now had a caretaker.

I had been dragging the body to the ravine's edge when Elmo appeared out of the woods where, possibly, he had answered a call of nature.

Of course it had been necessary to kill Elmo, too.

After I shot him, I debated whether to dispose of both bodies in the dump, but decided against it. I did not mind the police finding Elmo, but I did not want a search to uncover Morrison, who could be traced to me—by the syndicate, if not the police.

I put Morrison's body back into the trunk of my car, being thankful that the weather was a bit below freezing, and drove away, wondering where I could eventually dispose of the corpse.

Now I opened the trunk again and dragged Morrison to the ravine and pushed him over. I made my way down and covered the body with some of the Wicker rocks and climbed back up.

I heard Pete Higgins coming up the road with the bulldozer and I watched as he covered the rocks and Morrison's body for what I sincerely hoped was eternity.

After Higgins left, I loaded the applewood into my car.

Yes, indeed, there is nothing so fragrant as applewood crackling in the fireplace on a crisp autumn evening.

